

Dr. Mzia Chikhradze

Senior Research Fellow at G. Chubinashvili National Center for the Research of Georgian Art History and Monuments Protection

Integration/Expansion, Georgian-Russian Cultural Relationship in 1910-1980s

In 1918 after Georgia's declaration of independence from Russia an interesting and quite peculiar culture derived there, which was preceded by concrete historical and political events. In the beginning of XX century the tremendous cataclysms happened in Russia – the revolution and civil war ruined the foundations of cultural life of the creative society there. Russian intelligentsia and aristocracy overwhelmed by “broken dreams” immersed themselves into “the mist of uncertainty” and driven with hopes for future moved from icy Russia to independent Georgia. I.e. after involvement of Russia in the civil war creative forces there found themselves being under the Soviet Terror. They had to find the way out for their physical and intellectual survive, that was how Georgia became shelter for them.

In 1922 Titsian Tabidze wrote in “Barricade” newspaper: “Russia three years ago – was something phantasmagoric. Some astral dust was snowing as frozen icicles in Russia then. Devastation brought by the civil war, freezing cold of the Arctic Ocean, hunger reaching the extents of mystery and blood-thirsty Cheka. Thrown away emigrants uttered unspeakable things under the inhuman terror ...

Cultural people used to kiss the land in Tbilisi right before us and cry when seeing the light of electric lamps...

Most of all . . . Vasili Kamenski sitting in a pleasantly warm café was crying and could not stop telling with Russian Khlysts veracity about Moscow nightmares and cold, when humans were valued less than animals.”

For the people survived that hell Georgia became the paradise and Tbilisi for them was like “an oasis in desert and attracted them, who tried escape the storms of the war and the revolution”.

Grigol Robakidze described thus Tbilisi of that time:

“Tbilisi is a strange city, but in 1919-1920 it became even more stranger. Russians thrown out or escaped from Russia were sheltering here. From the stage one can hear Kachalov’s voice... Khodotov was in Tbilisi too and his voice sounded from the stage as well. The drunk composer Cherepnin used to seat in café and grieved about Russia. The artist Sergey Sudeikin was painting the restaurant, which by Georgian poets was called “Kimerioni”– Sudeikin really filled up the restaurant with Chimeras. The artist Savelii Sorin was painting the profiles of elegant noble women on the canvases with beautiful, very beautiful lines... Who was not over there in Tbilisi for that time? Futurists stepped toward Dadaism here too. They created organization “41 Degrees”. In Tbilisi was Ilia Zdanevich too, he was great, when was reading his “Smert Garro”... Vasili Kamenski visited Tbilisi as well. There were others there too.

Tiflis became the city of poets. In café “International” it was even declared as the city of poets. Moreover – they were claiming that genuine poetry can only be found in Tiflis... The world was going downhill and Tiflis was the only city meeting this “downfall” with poetic songs. Such was a fantasy of Tbilisi...”

Georgian “Mencheviks surrounded with complex political and economic problems did not interfere in the going on processes of literature and art,” on the contrary, in some cases they supported art and culture, and accordingly, there was established the fruitful soil for creative freedom in Georgia. A number of groups, circles, salons, newspapers, printing houses sprang up in Tbilisi. Russian, Polish, Armenian, German, Hebrew, Ukrainian and other nationalities participated in this process alongside with Georgian artists, poets and writers. Thus, for example, Russian poet Juri Degen established an art association “Abjari” together with its Poets’ Union, Russian poet and caricaturist Sergei Gorodetski founded Tbilisi Poets’ Association”. He also was the editor of the “ARS” magazine published by the writer Anna Antonovskaja. Poet Tatiana Vedchorka established a group “Alfa-Lira”; Juri Degen was a publisher of the “Phoenix” journal, Hebrew poet Raphalovich issued the journal “Orion”, Russian poet Korneev and Ukrainian Vasili Katanian published the journal “ART”, “Tbilisi Guild of the Poets” at the Artists Association was issuing the literary miscellany “Acme”. In these editions both in Georgian and in Russian works of poets and writers of various nationalities were published side by side. The artistic designs of these journals were also made jointly. Often the authors used to write articles about the works of their colleagues. These journals published manifestos, programs of various

groups, associations, in other words creative contacts between them were very strong and this was well reflected in the press of those times.

In 1918 the Futurist poets and artists Ilia Zdanevich, Kara-Darvish (Akop Ganjian), A. Kruchenykh, N. Cherniavski, L. Gudiashvili and Kirill Zdanevich founded the organization “Futurists’ Syndicate” in Tbilisi, which was very short-lived and soon was broken up into various groups. One part of the Futurists founded the union “Futvseuchbishche”. Ilia Zdanevich, Kruchenykh and Terentiev founded a new group “41⁰”. I.e. at the end of 1910s Russian Futurists lived and worked in Tbilisi, together with the local brothers Zdanevich they became actively involved into artistic life of the city.

The integrity of above listed facts created a significant artistic-and-cultural space, which happened to be very attractive for artists of various nationalities, since it provided a fruitful medium for creative quest and experiments. Free environment for creative cooperation of various national artistic forces, integration of different national signs into united artistic system - where, notwithstanding the individual and national sounding of the representatives of art, one common language has been formed - became a characteristic feature of Georgian intercultural and international art, the art which is known under the name of Tbilisi Modernism.

In 1917-1921 Tbilisi actually played the same role in Caucasus as Paris in Europe in the beginning of the century; in other words it became the cultural center of Russia and Caucasus, where the elite artistic society gathered and its accumulated artistic energy was being creatively expressed at full strength.

In Tbilisi of those days very often the poets and artists were making public presentations and delivering lectures and reports on various topics. Representatives of radically different groups and directions changed each other at those appearances discussing avant-garde or already completed stages in art development. Thus for example the journal “ARS” (1918) announced, that the following lectures were given within a short period of time: S. Gorodetski – On Russian Symbolism; Gr. Robakidze – About Andrei Bely; M. Khristoganov – Cézanne or the Fourth Dimension in Fine Art; Robakidze, Iashvili, Arsenishvili – “On Blue Horns” and others. At the lecture rooms of “Futurveseuchbishe” the following speakers made their presentations: I.Zdanevich – “Zaumni (“Senseless”) Poetry and Poetry in General”, “Internationalism and National Art”; Kruchonykh – “On the New Language”, “A Word per se” and others. At these forums the speakers were reading fragments from Futuristic works. In the “Fantastic Tavern”

side by side with the representatives of "Vseuchbisha" were presenting their papers Degen, Kharazov, Robakidze, Katanian and others.

The artists, poets, actors, dancers... often arranged meetings in cafes and clubs, where Tbilisi bohemian life reached its culmination. The majority of artistic cafes were predominantly painted with wall-paintings frequently done jointly by the artists of different nationalities. There on the stages of the cafes the actors, singers, dancers gave performances, writers and poets read their works, lecturers gave their presentations, here were held discussions, concerts, ballet performances, theatrical and literary evenings, charity campaigns, benefit performances... Artistic cafes in Tbilisi united the audience and performers; here often actions developed directly at the tables and the audience could actively participate in the performances. The founders and runners of Petersburg artistic cabarets could only dream of such union. One can say that arts synthesis occurred in those artistic cafes: music, theater, dancing, poetry and prose merged with each other and every single word about the art novelties was first voiced in these cafes.

Such was the artistic life in Tbilisi in 1910-1920, where the creative works of Georgian and other nationalities artists were closely interlaced as well as new trends in their art. It was clearly evident that this short period of time was full of intensive artistic life with the participation of the best representatives of the artistic forces of various nationalities.

On the one hand, the political circumstances promoted the flow of Russian creative forces to Georgia and on the other, the interests of Georgian political elite and their support for creation of free cultural milieu prepared the fruitful soil for art development. Russian avant-garde art harmoniously merged with local Georgian art and stipulated for rapid development of Georgian Modernism.

Intercultural environment of Tbilisi of that period was characterized by a true international art (in the best meaning of the word), which absolutely lacked pseudo nationalism and national provincialism.

It should be mentioned that inter-culturalism and striving to remove boundaries between various kinds of art was generally common for the avant-garde artists even though while moving in that direction they were always seeking "purely ethnic and zoomorphic roots", on which they wished to found their own "transnational" art. On that point is noteworthy one of the the leaders of Georgian Modernism - Ilia Zdanevich - the avant-garde poet and artist Georgian by mother

and Pole by father, who played a significant role in development of Russian avant-garde art as well.

Notwithstanding the cosmopolitan character of his art, Georgian artistic traditions and art were very important for him. Suffice it to say, that together with Russian avant-garde artist Mikhail Le Dantue he was the first to discover creative works of Georgian self-taught artist Niko Pirosmiani, and spared no efforts to collect and save his works. He was actively involved into all events of Georgian art of those times, he studied Georgian Art of middle ages, history and even geography of Georgia.

This kind of attitude was very common for the culture of that time, while national features, historic artistic roots and national artistic form played important role. And the Georgian culture founded on those values bore the international character.

In Georgian reality this kind of culture survived till the end of 1920s, though its destruction started much earlier in 1920s, after lost of independence, when Russian Soviet army annexed Georgia in 1921. Mensheviks government fled abroad. Georgia was forced to join the USSR. That was the beginning of purposeful destruction of Georgian national culture, moreover even the destruction of Georgian ethno type, together with all other tools by means of aggressive, antinational cultural policy.

In the second half of 1920s Georgian art and literature already appeared under the political pressure which was directed from Russia. The Press then clearly reflected all these events. For example, in Mnatobi Magazine of 1928 (N6) Platon Kikodze stated in his article that Georgian literature is assigned by creative crisis and the reason for that were “the traditions of Georgian literature saturated with nationalism”. The author fights against historicism and traditions. He says that nationalism is reactive and it needs to be changed with positive socialist ideas and that the main duty of writers is to serve to the Revolution. In Mnatobi Magazine of 1928 (N3), the same Author criticizes Geronti Kikodze’s opinion that “not only practical demands of the life but also the traditions of Georgian architecture would be taken into the consideration.” The Author responses: “the contemporary artistic style is founded only on practical demands of contemporary life and by no means on traditions” and “these traditions often appeared to be not useful but sometimes even harmful.”

The same tendencies is characteristic for the art critic of that time. Many critics, e.g. Simon Chikovani, Besarion Jgenti, Mikheil Kakhiani, Shalva Radiani and others, develop their

opinion strictly to this direction. That was obvious political request and politics was actively involved in art and culture and tried to direct them.

The attitude to Georgian language is of interest as well. For example, in the article published in 1928 by Mikheil Kakhiani one can read that nationality and formalism damages Soviet proletarian art. The author worries that in Georgia still are functioning the religious schools and Georgian is a leading language in colleges and institutes. Stalin's formula on "proletarian culture with national form and international matter" was quickly adopted and became the main direction of cultural policy.

The above declaration of Stalin became the basis for creation of pseudo national art and culture, which was absolutely empty of any content. There were picked up several pseudo-national signs and by using of their exaggerated and transformed forms it was created the culture of a new type with no artistic values, only with formal indications on national culture. This kind of attitude laid into the foundation of Soviet propaganda in art and culture.

It is of interest that the results of the processes started in 1920s were perfectly revealed in 1960-70s, when Soviet mass-culture was widely sprang up and everything national was profaned. This kind of profanation was particularly revealed in the applied arts, i.e. where national identity was layered during the centuries, for example, in national costume, carpets, embossing, ceramics...

Georgian national costumes – Chokha-akhalukhi for men and Chikhtikopi and dresses for women, which were signed by refined correlation of the colors and elegant décor, were absolutely changed. Chokha always was of unpretentious color: black, white, dark red... women's dress was free of over-decoration. If the dress was decorated with embroidering on the breast, the bottom of the gloves and the skirt it was always done with good taste and refined harmonious correlations. In Soviet times in the circumstances of mass-culture the traditional forms had been destroyed and Georgian National costume acquired a strange appearance. It has only formal similarity with the old examples. The colors of the masculine and feminine dresses were very sharp and their decoration was overloaded and vulgar. This tendency is continuing in some cases presently due to the stage demands, for example, some dancing folkloric ensembles prefer to wear the Georgian "national costumes" of that kind, which is well seen in the stage, i.e. has a sharp color and is effectual. In the cases, when the artist is talented, despite of some differences from the traditional forms, the dress designed by him/her contains the main features

of national costume – harmoniousness, elegant colors, beauty of shapes. But as a rule that happens quite rarely and mainly, the result of such frivolity is opposite – absolute destruction of traditions and national forms. Almost the same situation was with carpets. Mass-production and Soviet propaganda followed the “thematic” production, where the main subject was socialist subjects, and if the carpet was not of narrative character, then the elements of the traditional décor were used, but the traditional color correlations were absolutely ruined there. The kneeling thread was painted with chemical colors instead of natural and accordingly, the carpets with harmonious colors and their refined correlations were replaced by ugly, motley, tasteless production. In the other sphere of applied arts – embossing, one can find very interesting changes, aside to propagandist narration, where “the great achievements of socialist construction” were underlined, there are the works empty of any subject-matter without any meaning, where there are only formal indications on national, traditional forms. At the same time the objects have mass character, i.e. instead of handmade embossing the production was done after the pattern and so became the mass-production.

At the end I’d like to note that under the soviet dictator regime, Russia led the politics of cultural expansion. It was an unnatural, illogical process - artificially enforced influence on local culture. As the cultural identity is one of the main factors of the strength of the state, Russia purposely fought against the local culture. Georgian art faced the danger of disappearance. Russia was repressing national feelings, advancing all Russian, at the same time everything was done under the soviet ideology. So, this totalitarian regime ceased the natural development of Georgian art. From the end of 1930s has been created and developed the Georgian Soviet Art. Georgian art and culture at that time became pseudo-national; it like all other soviet cultures was without clear appearance and identification. All its own characteristics were eliminated. It had nothing common with the local national traditions and history. The insisted and forced “internationalism” (dictated by the “Big Brother”) has been opposed by nationalism. And the reason is very simple: forced internationalism is only seeming and has nothing common with the true interculturalism, equal combination of the culture and the art of various nationalities. However there were a few cultural “islands”, which were resisting the Russian expansion and soviet ideology. With this resistance were rescued those valuable and real cultural traditions, which were developed later, after the collapse of Soviet Union, on the way of building up the independent Georgian State. These national cultural traditions laid on the foundation of

development of Georgian art and culture. Cultural identity of Georgian people is still the strongest component of the new Georgian State. Culture is one of the major factors of cultural identification and the cultural identity is very important factor of the nation itself. So, the national culture, from its side, makes essential basis to the State. Finally, it can be stated that the historical experience of XX century's Georgia brings us to the conclusion, that when the national culture receives the "new blood", i.e. other culture integrates in it, this enriches local one and provokes its fast development. However, forcible expansion of the other cultures is a weapon in the hands of a hostile country for weakening the national culture and accordingly, for weakening the foundation of the State, where this expansion is spread. And the history of Russian-Georgian political-cultural relations of 1910-1980ss can serve as a good example of above statement.